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ABSTRACT

Past inattention to teaching gifted students may in part be due to the problems of defining, identifying, and determining the characteristics of the gifted child. In this paper, gifted students may be defined as those whose reading achievement or reading potential is well above average. Standard measures of this achievement and potential coupled with teacher, peer, and parent judgment offer the best chance of selecting the gifted child. School provisions for the gifted can be classified as special classes, acceleration, and enrichment. Research indicates that special classes can be beneficial, provided the instructor has some characteristics essential for teaching the gifted. Acceleration can be beneficial as long as the child's social, emotional, and physical needs are also taken into consideration. Enrichment can be restricted to the students' grade level or limited to reading experiences within the regular school curriculum. A judicious combination of both is the most beneficial. A student with an extremely high IQ and above average reading achievement has not automatically mastered all of the lower level skills. Whatever method is used, an educational system must challenge and provide the very best education possible for the gifted. (HTH)

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READING AND THE GIFTED STUDENT

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Do you remember when you first heard the story of the tortoise and the hare in elementary school? As I recall, the moral of the story was, "Slow but steady wins the race."

I remember being in Miss Martin's first grade and sitting smugly in the back of the room with the other slow readers when I heard that moral. I thought, "Well, there may be a lot of other kids in this room smarter than I am, but that story shows that, even though I'm slow, I'll come out ahead."

I'd like to suggest that we have drawn the wrong moral from that story. Instead of seeing a happy ending in it, we should, instead, have been appalled that the rabbit teachers and rabbit parents had not helped that gifted bunny develop his abilities up to his full potential. The moral should be, "Sometimes gifted rabbits, like gifted students, are not taught how to use their talents wisely." Some gifted students, like gifted bunnies, I suppose, do rise above neglect, but some do not.

There have been a variety of reasons for our past inattention to gifted students. For example, we seem to have a strong humanitarian tendency to concentrate on the underdog. If I, as a 2nd grade teacher, can squeeze in an extra ten minutes of reading instruction for an individual pupil, I will spend that time with little Joe who is reading below grade level, not with little Mary who is reading at grade level -- even though Mary may be reading farther below her potential and, hence, would profit more from the extra instruction.

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There is also a strong tendency in our society to stress sameness at the expense of differences -- except in athletics. An example of the harmful effects of trying to downgrade intellectual differences involved the son of a colleague with whom I teach. The boy's name is Bill and when Bill was in kindergarten the teacher told his group to open their reading readiness books and sit quietly until she got back to them. While she was getting other groups started, Bill turned his readiness book sideways and read the directions that were printed there for the teacher. He then proceeded to do what the directions said -- put a cross mark on the spotted duck among a group of unspotted ducks or on the east facing rabbit among a group of west facing rabbits. So far, no problem, except a waste of Bill's time. It becomes a truly sad story, however, when we learn that Bill ran all the way home from school that afternoon crying. The reason? By reading the directions and working the page, he had let the teacher and his classmates know that he could already read. Bill cried with shame because he let them know that he was different. Someone, parents or teachers, had convinced Bill that it was shameful to be different.

If democratic education means anything, it means to take each child where we find him or her and help that child grow to full potential -- even if, in the case of gifted children, that potential is drastically different from a norm.

Before examining teaching strategies, let's look at the issues of defining, identifying, and determining the characteristics of gifted students. These three, defining, identifying, and determining characteristics, are extricably interwoven. Although we might hope

that increased study would lead to clarity about who will be called gifted, how we can pick them out, and what they are like, this has not been the case. In fact, increased study has led to increased confusion and disagreement.

One sometimes longs for the good old days when Terman simply designated pupils with I.Q.'s above 130 or 135 as gifted. These students could then be easily identified with a reputable I.Q. test and those identified as gifted could be studied to determine what kinds of beings these gifted students were. These early studies on the characteristics of gifted students led to some interesting and myth-disspelling conclusions. For example, we learned that gifted students by Terman's definition are not emotional cripples, social misfits, or physically inferior. On the contrary, it was found that gifted students usually have average or above average emotional adjustment (1), that average gifted students are more likely to be social stars than social isolates, and that the average gifted student is physically superior to his non-gifted peers. (2) In fact, in 1934, Hollingsworth found that the average highly intelligent adolescent was even more likely to be judged beautiful than students who were not blessed with high intelligence (3).

Unfortunately, the world and our concepts of giftedness have become more complex since those simple days. Students now are classified as gifted by some -- such as Marilyn Wikstrom -- if they are intellectually, mechanically, aesthetically, and/or socially superior (4). Or, we may go to that final arbiter, the U.S. government, and find that the term "gifted" has been enlarged to

"gifted and talented" and that such students are those who have demonstrated or potential abilities in the areas of general intelligence, specific academic aptitude, creative or productive thinking, leadership, the visual or performing arts, or psychomotor activities (5). I understand that the psychomotor activities was dropped. It is rumored that it was dropped when a seven foot, all-state basketball center who was enrolled in a great books program was found to be unable to give the name of the letter on his jersey.

Despite the pleas of some like Kirk (6) who believe that broadening the definition beyond intellectual superiority is simply confusing the concept, I suspect that broadening the definition will continue in our schools -- particularly when it's time for us to write applications for government grants for the gifted.

Since today we are concentrating only on reading and the gifted, I can avoid trying to settle the argument about how broad the definition for giftedness should be and limit it to factors most directly related to reading. We will define the gifted, then, as those students whose reading achievement or reading potential is well above average.

In realistic, practical terms, how far above average a student's achievement or potential should be in order for that student to be classified as gifted depends on your own school situation. The actual cutting line might differ between a classroom in which all students were reading two or more levels above grade and a classroom in which only three students were reading above grade.

The definition and identification of gifted students should include but not be limited to those who have already demonstrated superior reading achievement. Limiting it only to already demonstrated achievement elimates those students with high potential who, for reasons that may be within our power to correct or because we have not taught properly, have not yet lived up to their potential.

Klemm (7) has found that, while gifted children usually read two to four years above average children in the same grades, some gifted children are relatively poor readers or have problems in reading that require special help. Achievement alone as a criterion for giftedness would miss such children.

Neither should the identification of gifted students be limited to those who simply demonstrate high potential through such measures as intelligence tests. To do so would place more faith in some intelligence tests than they deserve and could eliminate those students who, because of high task commitment, can actually achieve more than intelligence tests predict they will.

Of course, in addition to achievement and intelligence tests, another method of evaluating giftedness is through teacher judgment. However, there is only limited agreement between giftedness as judged by teachers and giftedness as measured by standardized tests (10). Kirk found, for example, that kindergarten teachers fail to take chronological age into account and tend to select older children as being bright. In her study, 70% of the children selected as highly intelligent by teachers actually had a mean I.Q. of 102 -- they were not gifted, they were just older.

Each of these measures, I.Q. tests, achievement tests, or teacher judgment, has strengths and weaknesses. For example, group intelligence tests are relatively inexpensive and easily administered for screening purposes; however, they may miss children who are not motivated to apply themselves to such tests and, if the test requires reading, low reading ability may hide potential. Individual intelligence tests seem to be the best predictors of academic success; however, they are expensive and not always readily available. Norm-referenced achievement tests will certainly point out some children who excel academically; however, they will miss the underachieving gifted child. Teachers, who work daily with children, may have the greatest source of information for judging giftedness; however, they, too, may miss underachievers or children who are not motivated toward school work (11).

Some schools have also found it helpful to add peer nominations and parent nominations to this list. The Magnet and Vanguard Programs for the gifted in Ft. Worth use these two additional measures. Children's peers may know them better than we as teachers and, contrary to some expectations, parents can be helpful. While some mothers think that, until their child was born, God was only rehearsing, not all mothers believe that they have spawned a school of geniuses. On the contrary, some mothers think that their children take after the father's side of the family.

Depending on how you define giftedness in your school, then, it appears that measures of achievement and potential coupled with teacher, peer, and parent judgment offer the best chance of selecting the gifted. Or you may have your own secret formula. Frances Chaney in Ft. Worth, for example, tells me that the best identification method is to ask a grandmother.

What kinds of overall provisions or general approaches are used in reading for gifted students? School-wide or system-wide programs for the gifted may be classified into three types of provisions: special classes, acceleration, or enrichment. These are not mutually exclusive and schools often use two or three at the same time in their overall program planning.

Special classes, of course, involve homogeneous grouping of gifted students for all or part of the school day. Are special classes beneficial for gifted students? The weight of research evidence indicates that special classes can be beneficial. Gifted students in special classes tend to make greater academic gains than comparable students in regular classrooms both at the elementary (12) and secondary (13) levels. Students maintain these gains into later school years (14) and they do not suffer social maladjustments because of this special placement (15).

The advantages of special classes seem to hold even for students who are already doing well in regular classrooms. For example, McCracken found that when upper elementary students who already had high general reading scores in regular classrooms received reading rate instruction in special classes, their ability to read rapidly grew markedly and consistently (16).

It is obvious, however, that simply placing gifted students in some form of special class does not, by itself, solve any instructional problem although special classes may make it <u>easier</u> to solve some problems. I saw this vividly in two, side-by-side, first grade classrooms in a school for the gifted. In one classroom, the teacher had high expectations for her students and

taught them reading skills, but she also promoted a classroom atmosphere where gifted children were encouraged to read widely and explore their many interests. In the second room, the teacher taught skills, not children, and had little or no concern for pupil interests. In the latter classroom, the children had developed an attitude that said, "O.K.; we've learned to read. Now what are you going to make us do?" It's interesting to note that, at the end of first grade, children in the first room had reading achievement that was superior to children in the second room.

In most special classes for the gifted that I have observed, children's reading and language abilities are being fostered. For example, in Como Elementary School in Texas, Mrs. Creed was working with gifted second graders who had been selected from five feeder schools to be in her class. She was using open-ended statements to stimulate thought. Mrs. Creed's statement was, "If I were one inch tall I would" and a second grader responded, "play hide and seek a lot, because I would hide in the cookie pan or the pencil sharpener and no one could find me."

Her statement was, "Most grown ups think that kids are" and the endings included "special" -- "midgets" -- "innocent".

Her statement was, "A mother is someone who" and the endings included "cares" -- "is beautiful" -- "cleans the bathroom."

My favorite ending was from a second grade girl who said, "A mother is someone who is pregnant." Mrs. Creed said, "Your mother is pregnant?" The girl said, "Yes, my mother is pregnant and my stepmother is pregnant, too."

While I was there a second girl named Courtney handed Mrs. Creed a handwritten poem. I had a chance to read it later and it read:

I love you little
I love you lots
My love for you would
Fill ten pots,
Fifteen buckets,
Sixteen cans,
Three teacups,
and four dishpans

Mrs. Creed had the very good sense to ask Courtney if she might read the poem to the class. Courtney said, "No," and Mrs. Creed simply thanked her for the poem and put it away -- carefully, in her pocket.

One theoretical advantage to special classes, of course, is that they enable us to put in those classes the kinds of teachers who are best qualified to work with the gifted. The reason this is a theoretical rather than an actual advantage is that we aren't certain what kind of teacher is the best teacher of the gifted.

I think that Mrs. Creed demonstrated one important ingredient -- concern for a student's feelings -- when she asked Courtney if the poem could be read aloud to the class instead of simply reading it without asking or not thinking it was worth sharing at all.

Shane Wilson was a second grader who found the advantage of a special class as well as an understanding teacher when he went from a regular, heterogeneous first grade into a class for the gifted in second grade. Shane was hooked on Beethoven. One day in his special

class he checked out a Beethoven record from the school library and asked the class if they wanted to listen to it. The teacher and the class agreed that they would like to hear it and it was obvious as they listened that they enjoyed it. When it was finished, Shane, his eyes wide with happiness, said, "Nobody in first grade ever wanted to hear Beethoven".

In addition to a concern for students' feelings, another essential characteristic for a good teacher of the gifted would be a sense of personal security so the teacher is not threatened by a gifted student's abilities. Joanne Gulliver made this clear when she told me about a gifted first grader in her room named Joseph. Joanne was writing on the board while Joseph stood behind her explaining to her Bode's Law of the Progress of Planets. Joanne kept writing as Joseph explained and finally, in exasperation, Joseph stamped his foot and said, "You don't even care." Joanne told me, "It wasn't that I didn't care; I just didn't understand it."

Unless they are brow-beaten into submission, gifted students are quite apt to question a teacher's decisions and a teacher of the gifted must be secure. A sense of personal security will help teachers explore student answers that are not the answers they expect. I observed a fourth grade teacher of a gifted class trying to get the class to say that a subject of a sentence names a person, place, or thing. She followed the time-honored custom of asking a question and having the children guess until they gave the answer that she wanted. Her question was, "What does the subject do?" One fourth grade boy responded, "The subject does whatever the predicate says it does." To me, that seemed like a very good answer, or, at least,

one worthy of exploring. Since it was not the answer that the teacher wanted, however, she ignored it and continued asking her question until someone guessed her answer. It seemed to me that a more secure teacher might have taken a different tack.

All teachers need a sense of humor, but I expect that it may be particularly important for a teacher of the gifted. This need for a sense of humor was brought home to me when I heard about Elizabeth. Elizabeth, a child in a first grade class of gifted children, was the only first grader who wore bifocals. One day while the teacher was busy with something else, Elizabeth tried to get her attention. After several unsuccessful attempts Elizabeth stamped her foot and said firmly, "Cow manure!" The teacher turned around and said, "Elizabeth!" Elizabeth responded, "That's much better than what I was thinking." In situations like that, a sense of humor helps.

In short, research supports the potential value of special classes for the gifted and common sense indicates that such special grouping increases the possibility of matching gifted students with teachers who are most qualified to teach them. But, like so many issues in education, no one can ever be justified in simply saying that special classes for the gifted are either good or bad. Their value must always be weighed against all the strengths and weaknesses of whatever they replace.

In addition to special classes, another commonly considered administrative procedure for the gifted is acceleration. The term "accelerating" seems to have different meanings to different persons. In our discussion, we will define an accelerated gifted student as one who completes any given segment of a school curriculum in less

than normal time or at an earlier than normal age. For example, children have been accelerated when they enter kindergarten at age 4 instead of age 5, or complete a nongraded, primary school program in two rather than the normal three years, or "skip" from the end of first grade to the beginning of third grade.

Is acceleration beneficial for gifted students? There is little recent research to answer this question, but earlier research seemed to answer it conclusively. Three separate studies by Adams and Rose, by Dohan, and by Wilkins show that gifted children who have been accelerated have greater academic achievement than comparably gifted children who have not been accelerated (17, 18, 19). In addition, Dohan and Stokes showed that acceleration is not detrimental to their social or personal development (20, 21), and Terman, who studied the gifted more than anyone else, concluded, after twenty-five years of study that acceleration leads gifted students to more advanced education and to greater success in adult life (22).

Obviously, gifted students should not be accelerated on the basis of mental age alone. The student's social, emotional, and physical needs should be considered along with mental needs and the merits of acceleration should be weighed against the strengths and weaknesses of available alternatives. But, since acceleration has had proven value, we are never justified in ignoring it or rejecting it without consideration.

Special classes and acceleration are organizational procedures involving the physical placement of a gifted student. Enrichment, for the gifted on the other hand, deals with the relationships between the gifted student and the reading curriculum. Enrichment is the something extra or different that we provide for the gifted in regular classes, special classes, or accelerated classes. Enrichment

should be an extension of a well-defined reading curriculum, not just a bunch of uncoordinated, tacked-on activities.

Teachers tend to be dedicated to horizontal enrichment of vertical enrichment. Teachers dedicated to horizontal enrichment see the reading skills for each grade level as sacred ground. Such teachers might dip into a lower grade level to find reading skill instruction for slow-learning students, but they would never cross grade-level boundaries upward to skills for fast-learning students. Instead, gifted students who had completed the regular grade level program in a classroom dedicated only to horizontal enrichment might read in other basals written for the same grade level, have opportunities for wide, free reading in trade books, work in academic areas other than reading, or, unfortunately, complete deadly ditto masters until the school year is over.

I observed this blind dedication to horizontal enrichment in the school district in which I live last spring. Mrs. Gillespie had 19 first grade students. Her "fast group" of six students completed the three preprimers, the primer, and the first reader by mid-March. For the remainder of the school year the fast group spent their reading periods completing ditto masters that provide practice on reading skills they have already thoroughly learned. Mrs. Gillespie says she doesn't believe in going on to second grade skills. Ryan Brogran, my neighbor, was a first grader in that fast group. Up until March he loved school; after that his mother had to fight him almost every morning to get him to go.

On the other hand, teachers dedicated only to vertical enrichment view the school reading curriculum as a vertical series of

activities without grade level boundaries. Gifted students who have mastered the reading skills normally assigned to their grade are taught skills for which they are ready -- that is, skills which will be taught to average children at later grade levels. The amount of supplementary reading experiences outside the regular school curriculum is limited or non-existent for a teacher dedicated only to vertical enrichment.

Because there are obvious advantages to both vertical and horizontal enrichment, the needs of gifted students will be met most adequately by teachers who use a judicious combination of both. If we thoroughly understand that all students' are not created equal and are dedicated to teaching at students' instructional levels, it seems indefensible to add a footnote that says, "except for the gifted," and, hence, avoid vertical enrichment entirely. Unfortunately, that sometimes happens.

Rosalyn Rubin recently found this lack of vertical challenge in a study of almost fifteen hundred children in grades one through six (23). She found the same proportion of children achieving below grade level in reading and being assigned below grade level reading materials. However, this was not true for faster learning students. For each one student who was assigned reading materials above the middle of the next highest grade, there were four to ten students whose achievement levels showed that they should have been in such materials.

I firmly believe that gifted students who are ready for and would profit from reading skills above their grade level have as much right as other students to be taught at their instructional levels.

In terms of vertical enrichment, one particularly corrosive problem involves the kindergarten child who enters school ready to read or, in some instances, already reading. How do we honestly feel about such a child? In Windsor Park school for the gifted, 30 of 105 first graders started school reading last year.

Ann Isaacs reports how one principal felt (24). The principal told the child's father, "We've seen this before and in time it goes away -- this superiority. By the time your child is in second grade, the other children will have learned to read, too. Then this superiority won't be so apparent."

Opponents of early reading instruction usually contend that it is wrong to force the very young child to read. Agreed! But it is equally wrong to withhold reading instruction from the very young gifted child who is ready. When a five year old has an I.Q. of 160, a correnspponding mental age of 8, social, emotional, and physical maturity, and is highly interested in books and their contents, should reading instruction be postponed? Should we wait until this child becomes bored and convinced that school will not meet his or her needs before beginning reading instruction? To deprive this child of the right to read when the child is ready is an injustice and likely to cause problems for later teachers who have to teach the child long after the peak of readiness has passed.

But what specific, teaching strategies should be used in the reading program for the gifted? Gowan and Scheibel took the position that reading teachers working with the gifted should be concerned only with increasing reading rate (27). Few authorities today suggest that our teaching of reading to the gifted should be so limited.

Many, however, in their justifiable attempt to break the lock-step, skill-by-skill straight jacket imposed on the gifted in some reading classrooms, imply that the gifted need little more than opportunities for creative reading (25). But it should not be true that a student who is classified as gifted automatically becomes disqualified to profit from a teacher's direct instruction in reading skills.

Some gifted children use their excellent memories to hide skill needs. Having memorized a sizeable stock of sight words, they get through early reading materials on rote memory alone, but they have no consistent method of word attack to help them when they encounter harder materials. They need direct skill instruction.

And a gifted second grader who has mastered initial skills and reads at a fourth or fifth grade level, still has many things to learn about reading. That gifted child, too, is entitled to and will profit from your teaching reading skills at the child's instructional level. Even professional golfers profit from refining their abilities with lessons. There is no reason to believe that gifted readers could do less.

It is as dangerous to generalize about the reading skill needs of gifted students as it is to generalize about the reading skill needs of other students. We do know that gifted students are likely to have a greater discrepancy between potential reading achievement and actual reading achievement than other students (28). So they certainly have room for reading growth with our help.

But the gifted, too, have relative highs and lows in reading skill development. They do not have identical reading profiles (29). Even though they are gifted, most gifted students need some direct

instruction in decoding. Some third graders in a gifted class that I observed needed direct instruction in meanings for prefixes and suffixes -- a background they had not built even though they were reading at a seventh grade level.

Basically, the instructional principle is this: a student with an extremely high I.Q. and a reading achievement well above age level has not automatically mastered all of the lower level skills we may incorrectly assume that the child does know. Let me share some non-reading examples of missing skills. Mark was in first grade with a high I.Q., a high reading level, and wrote essays on volcanoes, but Mark did not know that Monday came before Tuesday and Tuesday came before Wednesday. No one had ever taught him. Joseph often turned-up missing from his first grade classroom only to be discovered hiding under library tables reading books about black holes. It wasn't until second grade that a teacher discovered Joseph did not know how to tie his shoes because no one had ever taught him. In a special school for the gifted, one of several second graders was designated a class of "problem readers." Actually, every second grader in this class was reading at the second grade level, but in relation to their peers and in relation to their own, individual potentials, they needed special help. These gifted students profited from intensive instruction in decoding since they had developed their reading vocabularies through the discredited sight method only.

Pre-testing gifted students to determine if they have already mastered a specific skill would be beneficial to the students and to us, as teachers. If the test shows that the student has not

mastered that skill, we can provide it -- even if it is a rate of reading skill for a third grade gifted student or how to use the card catalog and the Dewey Decimal system for first graders. If the pre-test shows that the student has mastered the skill, we will not waste our time teaching something that has already been learned and we will not bore the gifted student with unnecessary teaching.

Although the criterion-referenced pre-test may sometimes be a pencil and paper test, it may sometimes simply be sound teacher judgment about skill mastery. If the teacher has evidence that a particular skill has been mastered, then, in the teacher's judgment, the criterion has been achieved and an additional test is not needed.

We do not need to teach the gifted something that they already know, but we do need to be sure that they know the essential reading skills. For example, gifted students who are capable of much self-directed study, should learn study-skills at any early age. When we have taught them to locate information, gather and organize information, and use materials from several sources, they can apply these study skills through self-direction. Students make positive gains in self-directed learning under a planned program that involves teaching, practicing, and applying such study skills (30).

Beyond the finite number of study skills that gifted students may learn at an early age are the almost infinite possibilities that may fall under the umbrella heading of comprehension. To envision the range of possibilities here, it may be helpful to fall back on a continuum with convergent thinking at one end and divergent thinking at the other. Convergent thinking involves systematic reasoning in search of the right answer and using facts given in the book to solve

problems. At the other extreme, divergent thinking is characterized by fluency, flexibility, and originality. Divergent thinking is a develop-your-own-data, what-does-it-mean-to-me kind of thought.

Some authorities stress only divergent skills for gifted, but at the convergent end of the continuum are the important skills of out-lining, summarizing, drawing inferences, and critical reading that students should learn.

At the divergent end of the continuum we find those abilities most frequently referred to as creative reading or, more precisely, thinking creatively with reading materials as the springboard for that creative thought. There are many suggestions for such activities in Labuda's book titled Creative Reading for Gifted Learners published by the International Reading Association (31).

There is no single answer to providing for the gifted. Research proves that we should not automatically reject special classes, but such classes need to be carefully weighed against your alternatives. Research proves that acceleration can be valuable, but we need to consider all aspects of the gifted student's growth. Teachers wedded to pure vertical enrichment or pure horizontal enrichment, unduly limit their options. We should cut upward across grade levels for the gifted, but not at the expense of broadening, horizontal enrichment.

Whatever system we use, we cannot afford the luxury of an educational system that fails to challenge and provide the very best education possible for the gifted. The unsolved problems of the world cry out for solutions that only gifted citizens can provide and we must prepare today's gifted students for that responsibility.

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